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Gandhi's Ram

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Gandhiji breathed his last in 1948 with 'Hey Ram' on his lips. Lord Ram was an influence on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi since his childhood. As the Mahatma noted in his autobiography, that being of the Vaishnava faith since birth, visiting the temples of Rama and Krishna was his habit. But the temples did not instil faith in the boy Gandhi. He noted, "But what I failed to get there, I obtained from my nurse, an old servant... Rambha, that was her name, suggested as a remedy for this fear, the repetition of Rama-noma (the name, Rama)." It became an infallible remedy for him for the rest of his life.

However, the Rama-nama which he refers to is no longer the idol to be found in a temple, nor a recitation as a ritual. Instead, it was something deep within the heart.

Rooted in spirituality

Gandhi brought religion into politics. But his religion had its roots in spirituality. Gandhian scholar Raghavan Iyer notes in his book, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, that Gandhi sought to make politics religious and religion practical. In this effort, he built upon a neglected strand of Indian tradition – the path of karma yoga or spiritual realization through social action. This was an action of the kind associated with classical heroes such as Rama and Janaka, and reaffirmed in modern India by Vivekananda and Aurobindo.

Gandhi aimed to work for the purification of politics and reform formal religion. He gave new meaning to Rama, Rama-nama and Ramarajya in his discourse. His own journey of continuous self-purification was by chanting Rama-nama from the depth of his heart in the form of prayer.

In the Harijan, issue dated March 18, 1933, Gandhiji referred to three questions raised by an iconoclast schoolmaster” and answered them.

The first was: “Is it necessary for a Hindu, following the life of Shri Ramachandra, also to go and see his image in the temple? Is darshan better than action?”

The second: “If we bow our head or join our hands before a living person, he replies in return, but the image does not. Then what is the use of doing it? What is the use of writing letters to one who never replies?”

The third: “The person, whose image a Hindu adores, might have committed some wrongs in his lifetime. Will not the adorer be harmed by copying those wrongs, which he is likely to copy if he worships his image?” [The *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, pp.111-112, Art. 125-Posers] Gandhi held it unfortunate that Rama who should be inside the self is sought in the image. Yet, Gandhi would not disturb the “simple faith” that saw Ram only in the temple. Gandhi’s response was as follows: “It is not necessary for any Hindu to go to a temple to worship (the image of) Ramachandra. But it is for him who cannot contemplate his Rama without looking at his image in a temple. It may be unfortunate, but it is true that his Rama resides in that temple as nowhere else. I would not disturb that simple faith.”

But deed, or action, was more important than the darshan. Mute worship constitutes the letter to god. God is not only in the temple. Gandhi wrote that he did not make any distinction between temple, mosque and church.

On the third question, he wrote, “Though my reason and heart long ago realized the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognise Truth by the name of Rama. In the darkest hour of my trial, that one name has saved me and is still saving me” (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, p. 112]. In all of Gandhi’s speeches, articles and letters,

Rama, *Rama-nama* and Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* (*Ramayana*) have been mentioned, commented on and invoked hundreds of times.

Gandhi’s Rama

Who is Gandhi’s Rama? Is he a Hindu god? He has clarified this several times. In his prayer meeting on April 4, 1946, at Birla House, Delhi, Gandhi said the following. “I laugh within myself when someone says that Rama or the chanting of *Rama-nama* is for the Hindus only, and that how can *Mussalmans* (Muslims), therefore, take part in it? Is there one God for the *Mussalmans* and another for the Hindus, Parsis or Christians? No, there is

only one omnipotent and omnipresent God. He is named variously, and we remember Him by the name which is most familiar to us. My *Rama*, the Rama of our prayers, is not the historical Rama, the son of *Dasaratha*, the King of *Ayodhya*. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second. Him alone I worship, His aid alone I seek, and so should you. He belongs equally to all. I, therefore, see no reason why a *Musalman* or anybody should object to taking His name. But he is in no way bound to recognise God as *Ramanama*. He may utter to himself Allah or Khuda so as not to mar the harmony of the sound” [The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 83, p. 364]

Gandhi knew the deep and serious implications of upholding *Rama* as a role model and *Rama-nama* as a cure for all ills in India where people from many religions live and where the Hindu-Muslim conflict is more than a century-old and the schism was deepened by the British with intent. Hence, he was always careful not to visit temples, mosques and churches. But he used the symbols from Hindu traditions and the religion to which he was born.

In 1929, at a public meeting in Bhopal, he said, “I warn my *Musalman* friends against misunderstanding me in my use of the word *Ramarajya*. By *Ramarajya*, I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by *Ramarajya*, a divine raj, the Kingdom of God. For me, Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of Truth and righteousness.” This was Gandhi’s religion in politics and public life. Gandhi further wrote: “Whether the Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of *Ramarajya* is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described by the poet to have received justice under *Ramarajya*,”

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